



The 11th Commandment -

extract from a short story from

Red is for Later, and other stories

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shortlisted for the 2014
SI Leeds Literary Prize

Kampala, Uganda, January 10th, 2000

The box was lying beside a vase of lilies on the kitchen table.

Laila picked it up. Inside were some fingernails, black strands of what looked like human hair, and a small mound of ashes.

She turned to Sam as he came into the room. 'What on earth?' She stared at his shorn head.

He took the box from her, put it down on the table and hugged her.

'It's okay,' he said. 'Dominic baptised me today, that's all.'

She pushed him away. '*Baptised* you?'

'It happened so fast. There were special prayers at the Movement Church. It's not such a big deal.'

'What's that in the box then?'

'Just ashes,' Sam said. 'Dominic shaved my head and cut my nails and then - then he told me to undress and he anointed me. Some of the ashes were mixed with oil and poured on me, and some with water for me to drink.'

'What's got into you Sam? You actually stripped naked in front of all those people, because this guy ordered you to?'

He took a small bottle from the drawer. He spooned the ashes from the box into it, screwed the lid on tight and put the bottle in his jacket pocket.

'Please, don't be upset.' He tried to hold Laila and stroke her hair. 'It's not how it seems.'

'Let go of me,' Laila said. 'First Dominic banned soap because bacteria on our bodies reminds us of our vices. And now this.'

Sam went over to the window and opened it wide. The kitchen of their two bedroomed house, at the top of Kololo Hill, had a view of their small garden, at the end of which they shared a boundary hedge with a school football pitch and car park.

'Why can't you follow a normal religion?' Laila said. 'Like the rest of us.'

'Like who? Like you? Islam you mean.'

A ball flew over the hedge and landed in the garden. Sam went out and threw it back. 'Hey, watch it kid!' he called.

'Sorry sir,' a boy's voice shouted. 'Thank you sir.'

When he returned, Laila was pouring herself a glass of water from the fridge. 'By the way,' she said. 'The front window of my car, on the driver's side, won't wind up. Could you take a look? It's been jammed for a while now.'

'Don't worry, I'll see to it.'

'The forecast's wet for next week.'

Sam stood watching white clouds against a blue sky. 'Yes, Dominic says rain's a good omen.'

It had all started on Christmas Day. The school was closed for the holiday season, but as Laila and Sam ate their lunch, they could hear sounds of a football game in the compound. Sam had been pensive for a few days, but Laila was used to his reflective moods. When she served the coffee, he handed her their bank statements.

'Ten million shillings transferred to The Movement?', she said. 'What's this for? Why didn't you tell me?'

'Actually, I tried to, last week. You didn't seem interested.'

'But you didn't say how much you'd given.'

He stirred his coffee, without looking at her.

'Well, who are they?' she said. 'And why this donation?'

'The organisation's the Restoration of the Ten Commandments. They call it The Movement.'

'So, it's The Movement this time. In the 80's, it was coincidences and the Celestine Prophecy. In the 90's you were in love with Deepak Chopra. Then it was breathing with the Art of Living Foundation. After that Osho's Inner Science Ashram ...'

'Stop it Laila.' Sam stared straight at her.

'When will you stop dabbling in cults? They're obviously not giving you the answers you're so desperate for.'

He banged his fist on the table. 'Don't mock me Laila. The Movement *isn't* a cult.'

She went to the window and looked across at the school compound. A loud cheer arose as a goal was scored. 'What is it then? Which God do they worship?'

'If you must know, the same God as you. Dominic asked me for a donation to help build a school for orphans and I didn't think you'd mind because you believe in giving to charity. I'm sorry, I should've told you.'

'But we don't know anything about these people. What if they're fraudsters?'

Sam went over and put his arms round her. 'It's all right, I promise. I trust Dominic.'

'Just be cautious.' She leaned her head against him.

The following week, in the New Year, Sam had meetings every evening, and they ate late. While they were clearing the table after dinner one night, Sam told Laila the Movement Headquarters were at Kanungu, a small town close to the Congo border, where they'd built a Church, a school, offices, dormitories, farms and a cemetery.

Laila was changing the water for the lilies, leaving a rank sweetness in the air. She looked up. 'A cemetery?'

A breeze blew in through the window causing the tea lights on the table to waver. Sam tried to rekindle them, and Laila shaded the lights with her palms to help him. They revived for an instant, then flickered and went out.

She confided in her friend Nicole.

'Be patient Laila. You know what Sam's like, he's a searcher, never satisfied. He'll come back.'

'No, this time it's different, the donation, this Dominic, the bizarre rituals and endless meetings.'

'At least it's only God he's with, not another woman. Don't worry, he'll soon get bored.'

A week later came the incident with the ashes.

Then one night, Sam returned from his meeting in the early hours of the morning, switched on the lamp and got into bed with a book.

Laila moved close to him and put her head on his shoulder.

'You must be tired. What's that you're reading?'

'Oh, nothing that would interest you.'

'Sam, my car window's still jammed, and the rain's making the driving seat damp.' She pinched his cheek. 'Are you listening?'

She pulled the black book from him and read aloud.

'Published in 1996. A Timely Message from Heaven, The End of the Present Times.'

'Don't Laila. You'll lose my place.'

She pushed his hands away. 'Sam,' she continued. *'Those sheep that do repeatedly read this book shall be delivered from the darkness. Your shepherd, Dominic.'*

She hurled the book across the room.